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## Grant's Des Moines Speech

Even an old soldier in the city of Des Moines on Wednesday, September 29, 1875, would have been deeply impressed with the profusion of floral decorations and the universal display of patriotic colors. Spanning Fourth Street from the Aborn House to the Allen Block was a triumphal arch, on one side of which in mammoth letters were the words "Welcome to Des Moines", while on the other side, as a fitting thought for the departing guest, was the stirring sentiment, "The Union Forever". The visitor who made his way through the jostling crowd along Fourth Street to the Savery House, where two of the largest flags ever brought to Des Moines were floating in the autumnal breeze, would have noticed another arch inscribed with the legends, "Army of the Tennessee" and "Let us have Peace". Patriotic selections played by two military bands thrilled the crowds of Civil War veterans who thronged the streets.

The occasion for this display of patriotism in the capital city of Iowa was the annual reunion of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee. Conspicuous among the members of the organization were some of the most able military leaders in the world. President Ulysses S. Grant, the most illustrious American soldier of the century, whose name and



fame were cherished with those of Washington and Lincoln, honored the reunion with his quiet and unostentatious presence. General William T. Sherman, loved by every boy in blue and admired the world over for his military genius, was president of the Society. The Secretary of War, W. W. Belknap, one of the most eminent commanders of Iowa troops, was also in attendance.

The President and his party arrived on the Des Moines Valley Railroad about half past three in the morning of September 29th, and remained in their special cars until seven. Between six and seven a special salute of twenty-one guns was fired for the President, and two salutes of thirteen guns each for Secretary Belknap and General Sherman. The formal program of the reunion began with a business session of the Society at eleven o'clock in the Opera House.

In the evening there was music by the St. Louis Arsenal Band and Drum Corps, a number of addresses, and an elaborate banquet at the Savery which was reported to have been unquestionably "the finest feast ever spread in Iowa." The address of welcome by Judge C. C. Cole was greeted with hearty applause. Then General Sherman introduced Thomas C. Fletcher, formerly the Governor of Missouri, as orator of the occasion. He spoke at some length concerning Iowa in the Civil War and paid a high tribute to the service of the private soldier. At the close of his address there were loud cries for



Grant, nor would his erstwhile comrades in arms be quiet until the President came to the footlights and spoke ingenuously of the war, of problems confronting the nation, and of his own ideals.

“Comrades: — It always affords me much gratification to meet my old comrades in arms of ten to fourteen years ago, and to live over again the trials and hardships of those days, hardships imposed for the preservation and perpetuation of our free institutions. We believed then, and believe now, that we had a government worth fighting for, and if need be, dying for. How many of our comrades of those days paid the latter price for our preserved Union! Let their heroism and sacrifices be ever green in our memory. Let not the results of their sacrifices be destroyed. The Union and the free institutions for which they fell should be held more dear for these sacrifices.

“We will not deny to any of those who fought against us any privileges under the government which we claim for ourselves. On the contrary we welcome all such of them who come forward in good faith to help build up the waste places and perpetuate our institutions against all enemies as brothers in full interest with us in a common heritage. But we are not prepared to apologize for the part we took in the great struggle. It is to be hoped that like trials will never befall our country. In this sentiment no class of people can more heartily join than the soldier who submitted to the dangers, trials



and hardships of the camp and the battle-field, on which ever side he may have fought. No class of people are more interested in guarding against a recurrence of those days. Let us then begin by guarding against every enemy threatening the perpetuity of free republican institutions.

“I do not bring into this assemblage politics, certainly not partizan politics, but it is a fair subject for the deliberation of soldiers to consider what may be necessary to secure the prize for which they battled. In a republic like ours, where the citizen is the sovereign and the official the servant, where no power is exercised except by the will of the people, it is important that the sovereign — the people — should possess intelligence. The free school is the promoter of that intelligence which is to preserve us as one Nation. If we are to have another contest in the near future of our national existence I predict that the dividing line will not be Mason and Dixon’s, but between patriotism and intelligence on the one side, and superstition, ambition and ignorance on the other. Now in this centennial year of our national existence, I believe it a good time to begin the work of strengthening the foundation of the house commenced by our patriotic forefathers one hundred years ago at Concord and Lexington. Let us all labor to add all needful guarantees for the more perfect security of Free Thought, Free Speech, a Free Press, Pure Morals, unfettered Religious Sentiment, and of Equal Rights and Privileges to all



men irrespective of Nationality, Color or Religion. Encourage free schools and resolve that not one dollar of money appropriated to their support, no matter how raised, shall be appropriated to the support of any sectarian school. Resolve that either the state or Nation, or both combined, shall support institutions of learning sufficient to afford to every child growing up in the land the opportunity of a good common school education, unmixed with sectarian, pagan or atheistical tenets. Leave the matter of religion to the family circle, the church and the private school supported entirely by private contribution. Keep the church and state forever separate. With these safeguards I believe the battles which created us 'the Army of the Tennessee' will not have been fought in vain."

President Grant has always been known as a man of action and few words. His Des Moines address, brief though it was, represented an unusual oratorical effort, if indeed it was not the best speech of his entire public career. Although the speech itself was remarkable, its subsequent history was even more surprising.

While it might be assumed that any public address by the President would receive widespread attention, Grant's Des Moines speech would scarcely be considered sensational. Nevertheless, as reported and commented upon in the newspapers, it stirred up a tempestuous controversy. Since an exact copy of the speech as delivered was not available, the



early reports were neither uniform nor accurate, while the editorials based upon flagrant misquotation were at cross-purposes. One of the New York papers said that the speech was "so bungling in its construction that it must have been Grant's own," and that "it would never have been made if he had not escaped from his keepers and from all good political advisers."

The Philadelphia *Times* praised the address for its literary construction but condemned it as a third-term campaign speech. "President Grant has broken his silence," wrote the editor, "made a platform of his own, and flung his third-term banner to the breeze in defiance of all party organizations. Just who is the author of his remarkable speech delivered before the Army of the Tennessee, in which he defines his new political campaign, is of little consequence. It has been elaborately prepared, and has the merit of polished culture and studied expression, such as the politician would employ. It is, in fact, a distinct political departure, making the bid of desperation for a continuance of power." Democratic papers in Boston agreed with this view and thought the speech had been "deliberately and craftily planned".

The New York *Tribune* commented upon the fact that President Grant broke his usual custom and read a speech of some length in answer to a call from the audience. The only feature of the address to which any political significance could attach, the



writer thought, was the pointed reference to the subject of common schools and the necessity of keeping church and state forever separate. The *Tribune* concurred in the opinion of the President, but thought it a "mystery" that he should have introduced the subject in so formal a manner and upon such an occasion. The editor asserted that education was not a political issue, while the subjects of finance, currency, and administrative reform were vital questions, "and an earnest word or two on these, particularly on the currency" would have been much more appropriate. "As it is, men can only wonder why he passed over the questions on which the parties have joined battle, and in which everybody feels a vital interest", to talk upon one which was not a national political issue. In conclusion the speech was characterized as only "a contribution to the curiosities of official literature".

Amid this confusion of editorial comment, the *Iowa State Register* explained that the speech had been written hurriedly just before supper on the evening when it was delivered. During the afternoon while riding about the city a man in the President's carriage had mentioned the functions of the public schools in the course of the conversation immediately after the problem of reconstruction had been discussed. The President spoke freely on both subjects, whereupon his companion expressed the wish that he would sometime soon make his views public. Grant replied that if he had time he



would prepare a few remarks upon those two questions, as he would probably be called upon to speak at the reunion meeting in the evening. The ride was shortened for that purpose, and the President hastily jotted down the short speech.

Viewed in this light the subject-matter of the address became perfectly explicable: it was but the logical development of thoughts which were uppermost in the President's mind. The occasion was not suitable for a political address. Nor did the President wish to surrender dignity and courtesy for the sake of political preferment. The trials and hardships of war were still vivid in the memory of the veterans, yet they were eager to hear of the pursuits of peace. Far from being illogical or inopportune, the speech was the result of a happy combination of circumstances. In all sincerity President Grant discussed education as a factor in the preservation of peace and free government. The speech was entirely logical and the exigencies of the occasion sufficiently explain its origin.

The main controversy over the address centered not upon its source, however, but upon the content. The principal theme of the speech was a plea for the preservation of republican government through the encouragement and development of free public schools. To this end the President advocated liberal use of money for education both by the States and the nation, but opposed the use of such funds for the support of sectarian schools. His thought was ex-



pressed in the words: "Resolve that either the state or Nation, or both combined, shall support institutions of learning sufficient to afford to every child growing up in the land the opportunity of a good common school education, unmixed with sectarian, pagan or atheistical tenets."

As published in the *Iowa State Register*, this sentence was misquoted by the insertion of three words and two additional letters so that it read: "Resolve that *neither* the State or Nation, *nor* both combined, shall support institutions of learning *other than those* sufficient to afford to every child growing up in the land the opportunity of a good common school education, unmixed with sectarian, pagan or atheistical tenets."

Thus the President was reported to have said the opposite of what he actually thought, making it appear that he favored State maintenance of common schools only and was directly opposed to public support of higher education especially in sectarian colleges. In this form the speech was copied by metropolitan papers throughout the country and discussed in Europe. Professor L. F. Parker of the State University of Iowa declared that the erroneous statement rang "through the civilized world like the thunders of Jove, evoked repeated comments of the ablest pens, agitated the minds of the most sagacious statesmen and disturbed the thought of crowned and mitred heads."

Some newspapers, like the *Vinton Eagle*, con-



tained a correct copy of the address, but other journals that did not have their own reporters in Des Moines relied upon the *Iowa State Register* for the complete text. In that way the false version obtained currency. The published proceedings of the Society of the Army of the Tennessee contained an exact copy of the President's speech, printed from the manuscript, but that was not available at the time of the controversy.

In 1875 there was a noticeable wave of opposition to higher education at public expense. Much to the embarrassment of President George Thacher and others interested in the welfare of the State University of Iowa, President Grant's speech seemed to be in direct opposition to additional appropriations by the State legislature. Educators who were interested in private or denominational schools, however, were elated over the apparent "turning of the tide" against State colleges. President George F. Magoun of Iowa College, in an article published within a month after the Des Moines speech, hastened to take advantage of the President's alleged position in favor of unloading from public education "the upper tiers of institutions which have been piled upon it of late years" in order to "save common schools from Catholic assaults."

Meanwhile Professor Parker, who had become interested in the educational dispute, believed that the excerpts from the President's speech did not correctly represent his views — that something had



been added which the President did not intend. Accordingly he analyzed the speech, pointing out the inconsistencies of the address as published and calling attention to the fact that the sentence which was being so widely commented upon was not in accord with the rest of the address. In a paper read before the Iowa State Teachers' Association in December, 1875, he asserted that, "Only a single sentence in all the speech can by *any possibility* be tortured into opposition to all education by the State, except that in common schools, and that one is sandwiched into an argument against sectarian education, and made a part of it. It was this sectarian education, and this only, as we believe, at which he aimed all his blows." Moreover, Professor Parker argued that irrespective of the speech being hastily fashioned in Des Moines or the probability that words were inserted which altered the meaning of the speaker, still the speech as a whole did not sustain the extreme and positive declarations against State support of higher education which were attributed to it.

The presentation of these facts by Professor Parker convinced those most interested in public education that the President had been misrepresented or that he misrepresented himself — a point which President Grant alone could settle. Accordingly, Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood sent the Magon article to the President, in which he was made to appear hostile to "the upper tiers of institutions" supported by the State, and asked him to repeat



what he had said or what he designed to express.

In response to this request the President replied: "What I said at Des Moines was hastily noted down in pencil and may have expressed my views imperfectly. I have not the manuscript before me as I gave it to the Secretary of the society. My idea of what I said is this: 'Resolve that the State or Nation or both combined shall furnish to every child growing up in the land, the means of acquiring a good common school education.' Such is my idea and such I intended to have said. I feel no hostility to free education going as high as the State or National Government feels able to provide — protecting, however, every child in the privilege of a common school education before public means are appropriated to a higher education for the few."

Such an explicit statement of intention, of memory, and of opinion gave complete satisfaction to every one in favor of public schools, while the more reluctant were forced to believe that an error had been made in the first printed copies of the speech. As conclusive evidence a photograph of Grant's manuscript was obtained. A second photograph, taken by T. W. Townsend of Iowa City, was vouched for by the President himself as "the photo of the original Des Moines speech."

The chain of evidence was complete. The perverted sentence which had made President Grant appear to attack the cause of higher education, the sentence which had "evoked repeated comments of



the ablest pens", and which had "agitated the minds of the most sagacious statesmen" was at length made clear. Nevertheless, the misquotation persisted and found its way into some of the biographies of the soldier President. Grant's Des Moines speech is famous for what he did not say.

J. A. SWISHER